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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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A-ONE #1131 07/31/09

~ Mac Flaw Opens Doors! ~ People Are Talking! ~ AT&T DoS Attack!
~ Social Sites Targeted! ~ Firefox 4.0 On the Way ~ Spam Volumes Up!
~ Firefox Hits A Billion ~ No Free Win7 Upgrade?! ~ Bet On Skills?

-* Microsoft, Yahoo Reach Deal! *-
-* Brit Hacker Loses Extradition Appeal *-
-* Microsoft-Yahoo Face Tough Antitrust Probe *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another long, tiring week! Started off last weekend when we took a long 3-hour drive to Maine to drop off some estate collections at an auction site, hoping to make a few bucks over the next few months! That trip exhausted us for the next few days. The weather didn't help because our two dogs are skittish when it comes to thunderstorms. One hides in our bedroom closet, and the other pants louder than thunder! Neither makes for a restful sleep.

All week long we've had typical New England weather: thunderstorms in the afternoon, with hot and humid weather in-between. There used to be a time when I enjoyed this type of weather but I must be gettin' older!

So, how about the latest presidential gaffe: Beer-gate!? Imagine, the U.S. president getting involved in a local Boston criminal issue and making it worse because of his misinformed comments! So what does he have to do to make amends and heal the wounds that he tossed salt into? Invite the two sides to the White House for a beer! How King Solomon-like!

So, while I plan and get ready for another road trip this weekend, let's move along and get right into this week's issue!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It's been another depressingly slow week in the NewsGroup, and the usable messages generated this week could be counted on your fingers. Let's hope that it's just because people are on vacation and that it'll pick up in a bit. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, but not holding my breath.

At any rate, this gives me the opportunity to talk a little bit about my favorite subject: politics.

Relax. I’m not going to start jumping up and down like I usually do. I just wanted to mention something I noticed about this week’s "Beer Summit"... the choice of beers.

By now, you’ve probably heard, Harvard professor Henry Gates, Police Sergeant James Crowley, Vice President Biden and President Obama. I cringed when I heard news of the impending gathering, knowing that there would be many who would point the the the occasion as an example of not taking the current economic situation seriously, or that it was another case of "intellectual dalliance".

I was quite surprised and happy, however, with the outcome of the ’Beer Summit’. The two subjects of the situation, Gates and Crowley, came away with good press, and without having had any sort of conflict... I know, I know, all those Secret Service agents around might have had something to do with that. [grin]

To me, the event proves one thing: No matter what your grievance or complaint, there is ALWAYS an opportunity to get things back on track. Of course, we don’t all have the advantage of having the leader of the free world as mediator, but do we really NEED that?

I WAS a bit amused by complaints about President Obama’s choice of beers. He chose to have a Bud Light. Some complained that it was ’too mainstream’. Excuse me? The guy chose the most popular beer in the country. Perhaps he LIKES Bud Light. And even if he doesn’t, who cares? He’s not endorsing a product for sale anymore than he endorses whoever it is that manufactures his suits or ties or shoes.

I suppose that if he’d chosen something like... oh, I don’t know... Grolsch, let’s say, that those same voices would be wailing about his choosing a ’foreign beer’... as if beer itself isn’t a foreign beverage. "Ohhh, he’s not supporting American values! He’s supporting foreigners over our own!" I can just hear it now, despite the fact that Sgt. Crowley’s choice (Blue Moon) is Canadian and VP Biden’s choice (Buckler) is Dutch. Professor Gates’ choice interests me. At first, it was announced that he’d be drinking Red Stripe. A respectable choice if you enjoy a mild pilsner. It’s also a ’foreign’ beer, being brewed in Jamaica. I have fond memories of laying on a sandy beach in Montego Bay, sipping on a Red Stripe, watching the world (not to mention the women) go by, so I wouldn’t fault him for that.

When it got down to "Summit time", however it turned out that the good professor’s choice was Sam Adams Light. Interesting... steeped in early American tradition, right there smack-dab in the heart of the original 13 colonies, as American as apple pie.

I just want to say a word about my attitude toward light beer. If you drink enough beer to have to worry about the calories that a glass of libation will impart to your waist, you’ve got bigger problems than calories, my friend. As far as I’m concerned, if you’re going to have a beer, have a BEER. Enjoy it, appreciate it, move on.

So let’s go to the tote board... Obama has a Bud Light, Gates has a Sammy Light, Crowley has a Blue Moon, and Biden has a low/non-alcoholic Buckler.

So we’ve got two foreign beers (Blue Moon and Buckler) and two "American" beers (Bud and Sam Adams Lights). I’ll bet that Rush and Bill and Glenn are steaming their brains trying to figure out how to spin this one... "World trade is a GOOD thing when one of ’us’ does it"? Nah, can’t do

that without including Biden. Oh well, I’m sure they’ll think of something.

But meanwhile, we still need jobs, we still need health insurance reform (Please don’t say "Health care reform. Our health care is the best in the world... it’s paying for it that’s killing us), we’re still spending billions in Iraq while bin Laden is out there somewhere. We’ve got a lot to do. Tossing back a beer every once in a while is not a bad thing. Neglecting situations that threaten to haunt us for decades IS.

That’s all for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they’re saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Bet On Your Gaming Skills!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Industry Seeks Comeback!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Video Game Site Lets Players Bet On Their Skills

Although you can win or lose real money, BringIt.com is not considered online gambling, and it’s legal in 39 states.

The site, which lets players challenge other gamers for money, says it is different from online poker and other games of chance because video games are considered a game of skill.

BringIt is set to emerge from its "beta" test version in the next few days. It’s free to sign up, provided you are at least 18. The site makes money by taking a 10 percent cut from people’s wagers and a $4 fee from winners when they withdraw their loot.

Founder and CEO Woody Levin, 30, said most of the players on BringIt play for small amounts of money, $5 or $10. It’s not really for "hardcore, crazy gamers," he said, but rather, people who "want to put their money where their mouth is, a little bit."

To ensure that first-time players don’t go pawning engagement rings, BringIt limits players’ entry fees to $25 for the first 10 games they play. The limit increases in steps until it reaches $500.

BringIt supports the PlayStation 2, the PS3, the Xbox 360 and the Wii. Players challenge each other on the site, but play on their consoles. BringIt holds players' entry fees until the game is finished. After the game is done, it verifies the results and credits the winner, minus the service fee.

To attract players of a broad range of skill sets, BringIt has separate tournaments meant for novice players and expert gamers. Levin compared it to the handicap system in golf or the weight-class system in wrestling.

The updates to BringIt will include premium memberships, Facebook integration, leaderboards for each gaming console and the ability for up to 16 people to play in a team against 16 opponents.

BringIt says the 11 states that currently ban playing video games for cash are Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Montana, Tennessee and Vermont.

Videogame Industry Looks for Second-Half Comeback

With the once-resilient videogame industry mired in a slump, investors are looking to big-name titles and potential price cuts for game consoles in the second half of the year to help spur a rebound in sales.

Major game publishers Activision Blizzard Inc and Electronic Arts Inc will report quarterly results next week, on the heels of dismal June U.S. videogame sales, which registered their biggest drop since 2000.

But the 2009 game release schedule is heavily weighted with big-name titles in the second half of the year, analysts say, in contrast to a strong first half line-up in 2008. That has made year-over-year comparisons particularly ugly.

The remainder of the year will see the latest installments in major franchises such as "Left 4 Dead," "Assassin's Creed," "Call of Duty" and "Halo," which could give sales a much-needed boost.

"There are some big games coming out," said Janco Partners analyst Mike Hickey. But he also noted that console price cuts are important to the industry's fortunes in the near term.

"The spark needs to come from price cuts on the hardware side to get the installed base breathing again. Once that happens, software will follow."

Nintendo Co Ltd's Wii costs $250 and is the top-selling home console in the U.S., followed by Microsoft Corp's Xbox 360 and Sony Corp's PlayStation 3. The cheapest version of the Xbox costs $200 and the PS3 sells for $400, putting most pressure on Sony to cut prices.

Console price cuts are always on the mind of game publishers, more so in the midst of a recession that is sapping consumer spending. Lower prices would help increase the installed base and in turn spur sales of software.

"People were saying the videogame industry is recession-proof, but it was fantasy," said Pacific Crest Securities analyst Evan Wilson.

"The correct thing to say is that videogames are more tied to the hardware cycle than they are to the economic cycle."

Although U.S. sales of game equipment and software are down 12 percent year-to-date, market research firm NPD Group Inc said full-year sales could still match or slightly exceed those of 2008, so long as the releases of some high-profile games are not delayed.

Activision, publisher of the hugely successful "Guitar Hero," has fared relatively well in the downturn even as its competitors have struggled and shed jobs. The merger of Activision and Blizzard Entertainment closed last July.

For the June quarter, Wall Street expects Activision to post a profit of 7 cents a share, excluding special items, on revenue of $811 million, according to Reuters Estimates.

Activision's new game "Prototype" was the top-selling title in the U.S. in June, according to NPD, although analysts say it has a stronger slate in the September and December quarters.

Electronic Arts has had a rougher go of it this year, but analysts are expecting the "Madden" football publisher to show top-line improvement in the June quarter, led by titles such as "Sims 3" and "Tiger Woods" golf.

Wall Street is forecasting an adjusted loss of 13 cents a share on revenue of $731 million, compared with a loss of 42 cents a share and sales of $609 million a year earlier.

Both companies' shares are up around 30 percent this year. Activision shares trade at 17 times forward earnings, while EA trades at 23 times forward earnings.

Brian Farrell, chief executive of smaller game publisher THQ Inc, said this week that he expected price cuts for the end-year holiday season.

"Just look at the hardware numbers and it would seem that a price cut would be in order by at least two of the three manufacturers," he said.

Nintendo on Thursday reported a 66 percent fall in quarterly operating profit, due in part to slowing demand for the Wii.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Microsoft, Yahoo! Agree On Internet Search Partnership

Microsoft finally persuaded Yahoo to surrender control of the Internet's second most popular search engine and join it in a daunting battle - taking on the overwhelming dominance of Google in the online advertising

market.

A 10-year deal announced Wednesday gives Microsoft its best shot yet to show its new search technology, Bing, is as good as or better than Google's. Microsoft also hopes to use Yahoo to divert sales from Google, which generates more than $20 billion a year from ads.

Gaining access to Yahoo's audience would instantly more than triple Bing's U.S. market share to 28 percent. That's still a far cry from the remarkable 65 percent of U.S. searches handled by Google, according to the research firm comScore Inc.

By joining forces, Microsoft and Yahoo are betting they will be able to focus on their respective strengths. By turning over responsibility for search technology to Microsoft, Yahoo can concentrate on sales of billboard-style advertising on the Web - and figuring out how to keep luring traffic to its Web sites, which already attract more than 570 million people worldwide every month.

While the agreement shapes up as a potential boon for Microsoft, it was greeted in the stock market as a letdown for Yahoo. Just 14 months ago, Microsoft dangled $9 billion in front of Yahoo in an attempt to forge a search advertising partnership, only to be rebuffed. Yahoo had also turned down Microsoft's $47.5 billion bid to buy the entire company.

Yahoo has been struggling so badly since then that Microsoft isn't paying any money in advance. Instead, it will give Yahoo 88 percent of the search ad sales made on its Web site, above the usual commission of 70 to 80 percent.

By spending less on its own search technology, Yahoo expects to boost its annual operating profit by about $500 million - but not until 2012, when the two companies expect to have all the pieces of a complex technological puzzle in place.

"I think a lot of people are kind of looking at the numbers and seeing a lot of question marks where they expected to see exclamation points," said Scott Kessler, a Standard & Poor's equity analyst.

Yahoo Inc. shares plunged $2.08, or 12 percent, to $15.14 as investors expressed disappointment over the absence of an immediate windfall. Microsoft Corp. shares gained 33 cents to $23.80 while Google Inc. shares shed $3.61 to $436.24.

It took Carol Bartz, Yahoo's chief executive, just six months to strike a deal with Microsoft - something that neither of her predecessors, Terry Semel and Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang, seemed interested in doing.

"This move makes up for a lot of the stupid mistakes made by the preceding administration," said technology analyst Rob Enderle, who thinks Yahoo will be able to devote more energy to developing services to compete with online hangouts like Facebook.

Shortly after her arrival, Bartz made it clear she was willing to farm out Yahoo's search engine for "boatloads of money" as long as she as thought the company would still get adequate information about its users' interests. Bartz predicted the deal will enrich the company over the long run.

"This agreement comes with boatloads of value for Yahoo, our users, and

the industry," Bartz said.

Yahoo will have limited access to the data on users' searches, which yield insights that can be used to pick out ads more likely to pique a person's interest. The value of that information is why Microsoft wants to process more search requests.

Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer could barely contain his excitement as he gushed about finally getting Yahoo on his side - something he has been trying to do for at least three years.

"I am very enthusiastic," Ballmer said in an interview. "This is what I have basically been saying for the past 18 months: The world will be better served for consumers, advertisers and publishers, and there will be more competition for Google, if we can somehow figure out how to get Microsoft and Yahoo together in search."

Antitrust regulators plan to review the agreement to make sure it doesn't lessen competition or compromise the privacy of people who use the search engines.

Google tried to stop Yahoo from falling into Microsoft's camp. Last year it formed its own proposed search advertising deal with Yahoo, only to be forced to retreat after U.S. antitrust officials threatened to sue.

Microsoft helped spearhead the campaign against a Google-Yahoo partnership. Now many people, including Ballmer, expect Google to try to turn the tables on Microsoft by opposing its Yahoo deal.

"There has traditionally been a lot of competition online, and our experience is that competition brings about great things for users," Google spokesman Adam Kovacevich said. "We're interested to learn more about the deal."

Advertisers will probably support Microsoft because a stronger player in the search market should protect them from potential abuses by Google, said Kevin Lee, CEO of online marketing specialist Didit Inc.

"If there's only one choice in search, that's just an uncomfortable position to be in," Lee said.

Like Yahoo, Microsoft has invested billions in search technology during the past decade. Yet it remained a distant third in market share while its online losses piled up. Microsoft is counting on Bing, unveiled last month, to turn things around.

Bing has been getting mostly positive reviews and picking up slightly more traffic with the help of a $100 million marketing campaign. Analysts believe the successful debut pushed Microsoft to reopen negotiations so it could expose its search engine improvements to a wider audience.

While Microsoft and Yahoo await government approval of their partnership, there is no doubt Google will try to increase its lead by upgrading its own search engine, said Danny Sullivan, editor of the online newsletter SearchEngineLand.

Already, Google is going after Microsoft's bread-and-butter business of software for personal computers. It's working on a free operating system for inexpensive PCs, a move that could threaten Microsoft's Windows.

"Google is very paranoid about Microsoft," Sullivan said. "They are always trying to figure out what kind of ‘evil’ thing Microsoft is going to do next."

Microsoft-Yahoo Deal To Face Tough Antitrust Probe

The Internet search partnership between Microsoft and Yahoo faces a tough antitrust review in the U.S. and overseas, with approval likely hinging on whether the marriage would foster more competition with market leader Google.

The deal, announced Wednesday, may have a better shot at success than the proposed pact last year between Yahoo Inc. and Google Inc. That agreement fell apart after the Justice Department threatened to block it, ultimately leading Yahoo to revive talks with Microsoft Corp.

Yahoo’s alliance with Microsoft could have an easier path because antitrust regulators are tougher on deals involving the top two companies in an industry, said Evan Stewart, an antitrust lawyer at Zuckerman Spaeder. Google is by far the leading search engine, with two-thirds of the U.S. search market, according to comScore Inc.; Yahoo is well ahead of Microsoft for the next two spots.

Even so, a key lawmaker on antitrust issues said Wednesday that the agreement "warrants our careful scrutiny."

Sen. Herb Kohl, a Wisconsin Democrat, said lawmakers would review the deal "because of the potentially far-reaching consequences for consumers and advertisers and our concern about dampening the innovation we have come to expect from a competitive high-tech industry."

Meanwhile, the Obama administration’s antitrust enforcers have promised to subject deals to more rigorous review than the previous administration.

"I’m expecting tough scrutiny in the U.S., and even tougher" in the European Union, said Herbert Hovenkamp, an antitrust law professor at the University of Iowa. He noted that European regulators have historically taken a harder line against Microsoft than their U.S. counterparts in their reviews of the software company’s dominance in other products, like Windows and Internet Explorer.

A Justice Department spokeswoman, Gina Talamona, would say only that the department is "aware" of the deal. Peter Kaplan, a spokesman for the Federal Trade Commission, which also enforces antitrust law, declined to comment.

Under the agreement announced Wednesday, Yahoo will use Microsoft’s search engine, Bing, on its Web portal, significantly expanding Bing’s reach. In return, Yahoo will keep 88 percent of the revenue from search ads for the first half of the 10-year deal.

The deal isn’t expected to close until early next year, and Yahoo and Microsoft said in a joint statement that they expect the agreement to be "closely reviewed by the industry and government regulators." They insist their partnership will lead to better choices for consumers and advertisers.

A key issue, according to Hovenkamp, will be whether regulators accept Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer’s argument that the deal will create a stronger competitor against Google.

"In the past, that defense hasn’t worked all that well," Hovenkamp said, and courts have shot down deals between the second- and third-largest players in other industries.

But Stewart said the deal should pass muster because it will provide "real competition" to Google.

Separately, privacy advocates came out against the agreement.

The Center for Digital Democracy, an online privacy advocate in Washington that opposed the Google-Yahoo partnership last year, called for an examination of the partnership’s consumer data collection policies, as well as privacy and online ad business practices.

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group also came out against the deal, as it had the Google-Yahoo partnership.

"The Microsoft-Yahoo deal should serve as a red flag," said Amina Fazlullah, media and telecom legislative counsel for the Washington, D.C.-based group. "When we lose independent search competitors, then we lose the ability to have multiple competitors working to preserve privacy."

AT&T Confirms 4chan Block After DoS Attack

AT&T on Monday confirmed that it temporarily blocked Internet forum 4chan over the weekend after one of its customers was hit with a denial-of-service attack linked to the site.

"Beginning Friday, an AT&T customer was impacted by a denial-of-service attack stemming from IP addresses connected to img.4chan.org," AT&T said in a statement. "To prevent this attack from disrupting service for the impacted AT&T customer, and to prevent the attack from spreading to impact our other customers, AT&T temporarily blocked access to the IP addresses in question for our customers."

AT&T denied that the block was related to the content on 4chan.

"Our focus was on protecting our customers from malicious traffic," according to AT&T.

AT&T removed the block on Sunday night, after it determined that the denial-of-service threat no longer existed.

"We will continue to monitor for denial-of-service activity and any malicious traffic to protect our customers," AT&T concluded.

Christopher "Moot" Poole, 4chan founder, confirmed AT&T’s story, though he criticized the company for not giving 4chan any advance notice.

"For the past three weeks, 4chan has been under a constant DDoS attack," Poole wrote on his blog. "We were able to filter this specific type of

attack in a fashion that was more or less transparent to the end user."

Some users, however, received errant traffic from one of 4chan's network switches, a "handful" of which were AT&T customers.

"In the end, this wasn't a sinister act of censorship, but rather a bit of a mistake and a poorly executed, disproportionate response on AT&T's part," Poole wrote. "Whoever pulled the trigger on blackholing the site probably didn't anticipate [nor intend] the consequences of doing so."

Poole said he was glad that the issue prompted a renewed interest in Net neutrality and Internet censorship. "Perhaps this was all just a blessing in disguise," he concluded.

Earlier this month, 4Chan was reportedly behind the popularity of the phrase "#gorillapenis" on Twitter's Trending Topic, an operation referred to as "Operation Sh*tter." In April, 4chan users hacked Time Magazine's "most influential person" poll.

Cyber-Criminals Targeting Social Networks

Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites are inceasingly being targeted by cyber-criminals drawn to the wealth of personal information supplied by users, experts warn.

Data posted on the sites - name, date of birth, address, job details, email and phone numbers - is a windfall for hackers, participants at Campus Party, one of the world's biggest gatherings of Internet enthusiasts, said.

A vicious virus Koobface - "koob" being "book" in reverse - has affected thousands Facebook and Twitter users since August 2008, said Asier Martinez, a security specialist at global IT solutions provider Panda Security.

"Its spread has been very significant and it has been detected in 4,000 different variants," he told AFP at the week-long event which wraps up Sunday in Valencia in eastern Spain.

The virus hijacks the accounts of social networking site users and sends messages steering friends to hostile sites coontaining malware, a malicious software often designed to infiltrate a computer system for illicit purposes.

In one of its variants, Koobface sends the victim a warning that its Flash player is outdated along with an invitation to download a new version, which is is in fact the virus.

Malware can be used to steal bank account data or credit card information once installed on a personal computer.

Facebook has sought to resist attacks by Koobface and similar viruses by blocking links to hostile sites and shutting down accounts from users that show signs of infection, such as sending too many messages.

"You also must be very careful with people who ask to join your friends list," said Laura Garcia, who writes a popular blog about Internet

security, adding that hackers often sent requests.

Another danger of social networking sites are the popular quizzes, horoscopes and games made available for free to users which can sometimes be used to hide links to hostile sites, she added.

Birthday greetings and well as messages sent at Christmas and other holidays may also appear to come from friends when in fact they are linked directly to sites that try to convince would-be victims to reveal personal information like passwords or bank numbers, said Martinez.

The vulnerability of social networking sites was underscored in a study by security company Sophos made public earlier this month.

It found that about half of all companies un the United States block some or all access to them due to concerns about cyber incursions via the sites.

Facebook says that less than one percent of its users have been affected by a security issue, such as a virus, since the site opened in 2004.

Garcia said the number of viruses detected in recent years has exploded while the profile of cyber-criminals has changed.

"Before it was very savvy teenagers who wanted to show off their computer skills. Now you don’t really need to know much about information technology to be a hacker, all the tools have already been created," she said.

Real cyber-crime mafias have now taken over, especially in Russia, China Brazil and the Ukraine whose goals are purely economic gain, she said, underscoring that hacking could be highly lucrative.

For an initial investment of 1,500 dollars (1,050 euros) for Mpack, a programme created to infect web pages, hackers can obtain a profit of between 21,000 and 847,000 dollars in just one month, Martinez said.

Around 6,000 people are expected to attend the Campus Party, which unites participants from all over the world to share ideas, experiences and all types of activities related to computers, communications and new technology.

The annual event began in Spain in 1997. Editions of the event have since been held in Brazil and Colombia.

British Hacker Loses U.S. Extradition Appeal

A Briton wanted in the United States for breaking into NASA and Pentagon networks in "the biggest military hack of all time" lost an appeal against his extradition Friday, making a U.S. trial more likely.

Gary McKinnon, 43, has fought a three-year battle to avoid extradition, including going to the European Court of Human Rights, but he appeared to have run out of options as Britain’s High Court ruled against his latest appeal Friday.

The court rejected arguments by McKinnon’s lawyers that extraditing

McKinnon, who was recently diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism, would have disastrous consequences for his health, including possible psychosis and suicide.

Judges also dismissed his calls for a judicial review of the case. Lawyers had challenged a refusal by Britain’s chief prosecutor to allow McKinnon to be tried in Britain, which would have avoided any need for extradition.

"For the reasons set out in the judgment, the claims against the secretary of state and the Department for Public Prosecutions are dismissed," Lord Justice Stanley Burnton said in the ruling, according to the Press Association.

McKinnon, whose lawyers describe him as a "UFO eccentric" who used the Internet to search for alien life, is accused of causing the U.S. Army’s entire network of more than 2,000 computers in Washington to be shut down for 24 hours in what U.S. authorities called "the biggest military hack of all time."

He was arrested in 2002 after U.S. prosecutors charged him with illegally accessing computers, including systems at the Pentagon and NASA, and causing $700,000 worth of damage.

McKinnon told Reuters in 2006 that he was just a computer nerd who wanted to find out whether aliens really existed and became obsessed with trawling through large military data networks for any proof that they might be out there.

He had used his own computer with a 56K dial-up modem at his London home with no password protection and somehow managed to evade every security measure the U.S. military had adopted.

If he is convicted by a U.S. court, McKinnon could face up to 70 years in prison.

Members of the British media and family and friends have waged a lengthy campaign to try to prevent McKinnon’s extradition. His mother was angry at the latest setback.

"It’s a disgrace, and they should be highly embarrassed," Janis Sharp told reporters outside the court. "This is from the Bush era, it is hold-over from the Bush era."

President Barack Obama "would not want this to happen," she said.

Spam Volumes Up 141 Percent, Aided By Botnets

Was your spam inbox extra full these past few months? Spam volumes increased by 141 percent since March, thanks in part to the more than 14 million computers that were taken over by botnets this quarter, according to a Wednesday study from McAfee.

These numbers mark the longest streak of increasing spam volumes ever, the company reported in its Q2 Threats Report.

The number of computers that were turned into botnets this quarter was

up 16 percent to 14 million, which works out to about 150,000 computers every day, or 20 percent of all computers purchased on an average day.

South Korea saw the largest bump in botnet activity, up 45 percent over last quarter to just less than four percent overall. Botnet activity in the country led to denial-of-service attacks against the White House, the New York Stock Exchange, and the South Korean government Web sites earlier this month.

Despite the botnet growth in South Korea, however, the United States remains the top botnet destination, with 15 percent of all new zombie computers.

This botnet activity is the "main driver" in increased spam levels, which has increased at a rate of 33 percent each month.

"In other words, spam volumes grow by over 117 billion e-mails every day," McAfee reported.

Malware writers have made note of this uptick - over the course of 30 days, about 27 million computers were infected with Auto-Run malware. This lets the malware creators take control of Windows' Auto-Run capabilities even if a user has not clicked on anything - usually via a USB or storage device.

The number of Auto-Run attacks surpasses the effects of the much-hyped Conficker virus by 400 percent, McAfee said.

Oftentimes, these malware attacks and botnet takeovers happen in tandem - malware writers have started to offer malicious software as a service to botnet operators as a means to reach a much wider audience.

"The jump in bot and spam activity we saw in the last three months is alarming, and the threat from Auto-Run malwares continues to grow," Mike Gallagher, senior vice president and CTO of McAfee Avert Labs, said in a statement.

Social networks like Facebook and MySpace, as well as micro-blogging site Twitter, have also been used to spread spam. In May, spam messages on social networks pointed users to 4,300 new files from the Koobface virus.

Mac Flaw Could Let Hackers Get Scrambled Data

A Mac security expert has uncovered a technique that hackers could use to take control of Apple Inc computers and steal data that is scrambled to protect it from identity thieves.

Prominent Mac researcher Dino Dai Zovi disclosed the software flaw at the Black Hat security conference in Las Vegas, one of the world's top forums for exchanging information on Internet threats.

About 4,000 security professionals are in attendance, including some who are really hackers. While experts ferret out software flaws to fix them and protect users, hackers use the same information to devise pranks or commit crimes.

It is not illegal to publish software that can be used to hack into computer systems, though it is against the law to use it to break into them.

Attacks on Apple computers are extremely rare, but security experts say that will change as Macs gain market share on PCs running Microsoft Corp’s Windows operating system. Security experts have identified at least three viruses infecting Macs over the past year.

The most sophisticated of them is spread via pirated versions of Apple’s iWorks software. It allows cybercriminals to take complete control of an infected Mac.

Another virus, OSXPuper a, is spread via infected websites that direct users to download what they say is a video player, but turns out to be malicious software. That software can subsequently download other types of viruses.

Dai Zovi, a security researcher and co-author of "The Mac Hacker’s Handbook," said on Wednesday that once hackers start to put substantial resources into targeting Apple’s computers, they will be at least as vulnerable as Windows machines.

"There is no magic fairy dust protecting Macs," he said in an interview.

The technique that Dai Zovi unveiled on Wednesday -- dubbed "Machiavelli" -- only works on machines that have already been victimized. It can take control of Apple’s Safari browser, stealing encrypted data from a user’s bank accounts.

An Apple spokeswoman could not be reached for comment.

Apple is the fourth-largest U.S. PC maker and continues to take market share. It held 9 percent of the U.S. market in the second quarter, according to Gartner.

"They are advancing. Our concern is that they are just not advancing as fast as they are gaining market share," said Charlie Miller, co-author of "The Mac Hacker’s Handbook."

They said the Mac’s operating system will be an easier nut to crack once hackers start to focus on it. That is because it has a lot more code in it than Windows, leaving room for more vulnerabilities and bugs that hackers can exploit.

While there is a limited supply of malicious software targeting Macs today, experts worry that the pendulum could quickly shift, leaving millions of Apple users unprotected.

"When the malware authors put out something that’s really sophisticated we are going to have a whole population that is really vulnerable," said Joel Yonts, an expert in Mac security attending Black Hat.

Mozilla Releases Firefox 4.0 Interface Mockups

Just days after releasing some proposed interface changes to Firefox 3.7 on its wiki, the Mozilla Foundation has put up a page to explore interface

changes in Firefox 4.0.

Two main versions are displayed, one showing the tabs beneath the address bar and one with the tabs above it. The tabs-on-top look is nice and clean, and saves space, but eliminates the title bar.

Also on the wiki page is a demonstration of an idea for combining the go, refresh, and stop buttons into a single context-sensitive button.

As with the proposed changes to Firefox 3.7, the Firefox 4.0 changes are aiming to reduce interface complexity, increase page space, and hopefully increase clarity for the user while integrating more naturally into Windows.

Firefox Passes One Billion Downloads

Mozilla announced Friday that it had passed one billion downloads of Firefox, its Web browser that has gained popularity as a free alternative to Microsoft’s ubiquitous Internet Explorer.

The Mozilla Foundation, a nonprofit organization which builds and refines public, open-source software through a network of volunteers around the world, made the announcement on the Mozilla blog.

It said the figure of one billion downloads was based on user-initiated downloads of Firefox, not automatic updates.

Mozilla claims to have 300 million active users of its browser, which was launched in November 2004.

Mozilla last month released the latest version, Firefox 3.5, claiming it was more than two times faster than Firefox 3 and 10 times faster than Firefox 2 on complex websites.

According to research firm Net Applications, Internet Explorer has a 65 percent share of the Web browser market, followed by Firefox with around 22 percent, Apple’s Safari with around eight percent and Google’s Chrome with around two percent.

Some Cheap PCs Aren’t Eligible for Free Win 7 Upgrade

Many potential buyers of laptops priced under US$300 in the U.S. had an unpleasant surprise over the weekend: The machines would not be eligible for a free upgrade to Microsoft’s upcoming Windows 7 operating system.

Wal-Mart and Best Buy attracted plenty of buyers for laptops during a promotional offering of laptops priced under $300. Some of those laptops sold out just one day after the offers began. The prices were respectableconsidering the generous features, including large screens, better graphics and DVD drives, which are not typically found in most low-cost netbooks today.

However, the laptops came preloaded with the Windows Vista Home Basic OS, which does not include a free upgrade to Windows 7 in the U.S.

Instead, consumers will have to shell out about $120 to upgrade the operating system.

Mainstream laptop prices have dipped under the $300 mark just a few times over the past few years. Last week Best Buy initiated a price war by offering a fully equipped Acer laptop for less than $300. Wal-Mart responded by selling a $298 Compaq Presario CQ60-419WM from Hewlett-Packard. Best Buy soon countered by offering for $298 Toshiba's Satellite L305-S5955, which is still available on the retailer's Web site.

Many potential buyers left questions on Wal-Mart's Web site asking if the laptop was eligible for a free upgrade to Windows 7. Vista has been panned by critics for being sluggish and resource-hungry. Windows 7, due for release on Oct. 22, has been praised by beta testers as faster and more efficient.

Retailers are still offering many inexpensive PCs that aren't eligible for a free upgrade to Windows 7. Best Buy and Wal-Mart are still offering many inexpensive netbooks, laptops and all-in-one PCs from Acer, Gateway and other PC makers preloaded with Windows Vista Home Basic.

Hewlett-Packard, which makes Compaq laptops, wasn't offering a free upgrade from Vista Home Basic to Windows 7 because Microsoft wasn't providing such an upgrade path to PC makers in the U.S., according to HP spokeswoman Ann Finnie.

Microsoft is providing a free upgrade to Windows 7 for consumers who buy a PC with Windows Vista Home Premium, Business or Ultimate, said a spokeswoman from Microsoft's public relations firm. But it won't offer an upgrade with Vista Home Basic because there won't be a Home Basic version of Windows 7 offered in the U.S., she said. Windows 7 Home Basic edition will only be offered in developing countries.

"Microsoft and its partners will continue to evaluate and offer additional programs such as the Windows Upgrade Option through launch, but we have nothing to share at this time," the spokeswoman said.

Microsoft has listed an upgrade path from Vista Home Basic to multiple versions of Windows 7. Users can buy an upgrade version of Windows 7 from retailers with prices starting at $120.

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